Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations hearing entitled, "The Recent Salmonella Outbreak: Lessons Learned and Consequences to Industry and Public Health."

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July 31, 2008

I
thank the Subcommittee Chairman for holding this hearing; our ninth on
the safety and security of the Nation’s food supply. Today’s hearing
will examine yet another major food contamination outbreak, Salmonella
Saintpaul, which has again shaken public confidence and devastated an
important industry.

Since April, at least 1,304
people in 43 States, the District of Columbia, and Canada have been
infected with Salmonella Saintpaul. These illnesses resulted in at
least 252 hospitalizations and contributed to at least two deaths. This
is one of the largest outbreaks of Salmonella in the United States and,
based on the number of confirmed cases, the largest foodborne outbreak
in the last ten years.

While it has caused personal
and financial tragedy to many, this outbreak should also be another
wake-up call that our system for responding to unintentional or
intentional contamination of the Nation’s food supply is broken. For
example, our investigation has uncovered:

- A
breakdown in the way the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
(CDC) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) shared critical data
with key State agencies;

- The failure of the FDA and CDC to leverage State resources; and

- More
than 3,000 State and local health departments working without
coordinating with each other or the Federal government, and with
limited resources, serving as the first line of defense in identifying
an outbreak.

Finally,
Mr. Chairman, we will hear that key sections of the Bioterrorism Act of
2002 — which were designed to ensure the rapid traceability of food in
a situation such as this — failed to perform as intended.

This
Act directed the Secretary of Health and Human Services to issue
specific record-keeping requirements to allow Federal investigators to
quickly respond to threats on our food supply.

We
have learned, however, that key portions of this Act — designed to
allow for rapid traceability — don’t work. While the FDA was ultimately
able to trace commodities associated with this outbreak, the process
was slow and cumbersome. Consequently, what should have taken hours or
days has taken months.

Today, we must not only
explore the failures of the FDA and CDC, but also what industry can and
should do to improve traceability of its products. While some in the
FDA have argued that loose produce, like tomatoes, are too difficult to
trace, some of our industry witnesses will describe systems currently
in place that rapidly trace their products.

We can
and must learn from industry. Rather than be at odds with good
Government and improved safety, they should be our partners. If parts
of the tomato industry can develop an efficient traceability system,
why can’t other parts of the food industry do likewise? Why can’t the
FDA mandate it, if industry will not voluntarily adopt it? Perhaps it
is time to revisit what additional changes to existing regulations may
be required to achieve this goal.

We have a number
of outstanding witnesses today. I thank them for coming and look
forward to hearing their views on what needs to be done to prevent
another debacle. With their help, I believe we can restore public
confidence in the safety of our food supply and the regulatory agencies
most responsible for protecting it.

Prepared by the Committee on Energy and Commerce

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